

PIANO AT THE BLUU!

by

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## ABSTRACT

When I first considered different ideas for an honors project, I initially felt that I had a plethora of options to pick from. My first thought was to do a lecture recital, possibly on a lesser-known composer. Upon further reflection, however, I felt that this was a bit too standard, and so I thought about organizing a lecture recital consisting of my own compositions. As attractive as this was to me, I also decided against it, just like I did with the first idea. Coordinating a recital of my own compositions with all of the other solo performances I would have to give at that point in my senior year would have been very difficult logistically speaking. It was finally at this time that it occurred to me to do my honors thesis on a project that I had been working on at the time, a concert series that I began organizing at the BLUU in my junior year. The more I considered it, I realized that I wanted to lay down a formal record of the endeavor and describe both how the project came to be and how it would expand in the future.

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## INTRODUCTION

### *The Genesis of the Idea*

The idea for the BLUU concerts began in my sophomore year. Although I had noticed the beautiful Steinway model M piano on the third floor of the BLUU as soon as my first semester on campus, it did not occur to me to hold concerts there until much later. At some point, however, it dawned on me that the third floor of the BLUU would be the perfect place for an informal concert – a concert where the walls between the performer and the audience would be substantially thinner, if not entirely removed.

This line of thinking regarding removing walls between the performer and audience has always been important to me as a pianist and composer. It is crucial for classical music to not only be heard inside of the concert hall, but also in various community settings besides standard performance venues. In this way, musicians can cultivate real relationships with their audiences. However, when presentations of classical music are limited to performances in concert halls or to what can be heard on the car radio or streaming platforms, an audience has no opportunity to meaningfully interact with the artists producing the music. This lack of intimacy between performer and audience eventually results in audiences dwindling. Indeed, this phenomenon has been already been noticed in the classical music industry for the last several decades. Although some exaggerate the severity of it, there is still a great deal to be said about how classical music can be presented more effectively in contemporary society.

For example, if a person examines the development of concerts throughout history, it is easy to observe that the ritual of concert going was far less bureaucratic before the 20th century. Indeed, contrary to much current praxis, concerts were readily accessible to the public and did

not take place solely in specialized venues. A good illustration of this are the concerts that J.S. Bach held at a local coffee shop in Leipzig. In addition, audience etiquette was far more relaxed in previous centuries. Audiences were not expected to memorize a complex code of conduct before entering a performance space. Instead, talking and eating was a regular behavior during many concerts. Gone was the wall between artist and performer. In fact, the audience had the power to throw a performer out if they did not live up to a high artistic standard.

Perhaps the classical music industry should not entirely go back to some of the laxity of these bygone eras, but at the same time, there is something to be learned from the way previous generations organized concerts. This was an idea I wanted to explore with concerts at the BLUU. What would happen if I situated classical music concerts right in the middle of an area on campus with the most student traffic? Would people come, and would people even be interested? Regardless of the success of the project, I knew that I at least wanted the average person at TCU to be able to have the opportunity to hear a classical music concert in a comfortable and accessible environment.

## THE PROCESS

### *Planning and Advertising*

However, there was still the very practical matter of obtaining approval for the idea, and I weighed out many lines of action before proceeding. I first thought to present the idea to the piano faculty before reaching out to the BLUU. However, I eventually decided to ask the BLUU first because it would be more effective to mention an idea that could happen in actuality rather than an idea that was still highly hypothetical. I felt also that it was more responsible to do some of the initial heavy legwork myself in order to show that I had a commitment to the project. However, the problem was that I did not know how to best reach out to the BLUU. In order to

answer this question, I met with Sarah Walters, the current Coordinator of Music Admissions at the School of Music. After talking through some of the logistics of how the concerts could be organized, she referred me to Deepti Chadee, Director of University Unions. After a few emails back and forth, Ms. Walters and I had a meeting with Ms. Chadee. This is when we had the first serious discussion of the various things that would have to be done in order for this project to get off the ground.

First was the issue of scheduling the concerts. I quickly learned that I would not be able to schedule a monthly concert on the same day every month. This is because there are multiple events occurring on the third floor of the BLUU: events that can sometimes be unpredictable. Because of this, I was only able to schedule concerts two weeks in advance. This required a bit more legwork in terms of getting student performers lined up. I usually would try to give the performers more advanced notice than I would have otherwise. We also had to look into whether the seating area could be arranged differently for the concerts and whether we would need extra chairs or not. Currently, these questions seem relatively simple to me, but at the time they required a good deal of planning.

In addition, I also learned about advertising from designing and displaying posters for the concerts. Something that I did not know before this project was that each TCU building has its own rules for displaying signage. Originally, I had thought of displaying printed posters at the BLUU. However, after talking with Ms. Chadee, I learned that only digital signage is allowed at the BLUU. I therefore had to take the printed posters I created and resize them to a specific pixel format that would fit on the BLUU TV screens. I probably have at least seven different sizes for these posters, including both digital and hardcopy formats. In the buildings throughout campus, there are different pixel formats that they each require. Some digital posters might fit on the

BLUU TV screens and yet not in the business building's or music building's TV screens. This separate logistical step taught me valuable lessons for how to design my posters. Whatever way I created my posters, I needed to make sure that they could be stretched either horizontally or vertically without sacrificing the visual appeal and message of the advertisement.

### *Obtaining Approval*

At this point I knew that I was ready to present the idea to the piano faculty. Enough of the initial work was done; now the pieces of the project could be put into motion if it should get approval. I first presented the idea at a piano faculty meeting in which it garnered much support and enthusiasm. However, there were some issues that needed to be worked through upon further discussion. One of these issues was regarding the general atmosphere that these concerts were seeking to cultivate. Although I had been aiming for a more informal concert, some felt that it would be better to make it a bit more formal. In the end, a sort of middle ground was established. Currently, performers wear business casual attire, with men either wearing slacks with a tuck-in shirt or casual pants with a blazer. Women generally wear casual dresses or typical women's business casual attire. In this way, the concerts are still taken seriously while audiences are not intimidated by the sight of performers in a full suit or evening gown.

### *Other Practicalities*

Another topic that we discussed during this initial meeting was how students would be able to sign up for the concerts. Furthermore, how would they obtain approval from their applied professor before performing in these concerts? I settled upon using a sign-up form that was based on a previously existing form that the School of Music uses for Recital Hour. Recital Hour is essentially a weekly performance opportunity taking place on Wednesdays that any student in the School of Music can sign up for. The Recital Hour form requires the student to list the



repertoire they want to play and to give full information about that repertoire (composer birth and death dates, full title and movement numbers, catalog numbers, length of time for the whole piece and individual movements). Each student must also get a faculty signature expressing approval for that student to perform. By deciding to use a process similar to this, I was able to greatly streamline the process of writing out programs for the concerts. I can now paste in all of the relevant composer information and create a recital program in a shorter amount of time. However, even though this system worked satisfactorily in most respects, a change I ended up making was to modify the way a digital signature was obtained. On the form it was supposed to be done using a touch screen pen; however, this was sometimes too difficult, so I just had a student's applied professor give written approval through e-mail.

#### *Organization of Concerts*

So far, we have had four concerts at the BLUU with a variety of composers including well known composers such as Chopin, Haydn, Liszt, Mozart, Scarlatti, Schubert, and Scriabin, as well as less frequently performed composers such as Heitor Villa-lobos and Alexander Rosenblatt. I have tried to keep the programs both interesting and educational. Choosing repertoire can be a lesson in balance. One can emphasize the educational nature of the concerts too much as well as emphasize their accessible nature too much. I know that if I did a concert full of late Beethoven works, such as his late piano sonatas, audiences would feel that the concert was too heavy. At the same time, I did want to put some standard repertoire, even if that repertoire that was lighter in nature. Generally, a format that I have kept to is to have one standard work of the piano repertoire (such as a Mozart, Haydn, or Beethoven sonata), a more virtuosic and exciting work from the Romantic period, and an interesting and thought provoking composition from the contemporary period.

## AUDIENCE RESPONSE AND THE FUTURE

### *Reception of the Concerts*

The reception towards the concerts has been positive. People come to the concert, often with their lunch, listening intently to the music. Everyone I've spoken to after the concerts has been enthusiastic about the music being performed. One thing that I was surprised by was how many of the people coming to the concerts were familiar with the pieces we played. This was particularly encouraging to me, and it showed me that one can still count on a general interest and knowledge of classical music among the public.

I can also tell that our audiences enjoy hearing the performers share their thoughts about the music that they play. This is something I wanted to do with these concerts right from the very beginning. Every performer that plays at the BLUU gives a brief summary and explanation of the piece they decided to perform. This is not only to help foster a connection between the performer and audience; it also helps performers gain public speaking skills. These skills are becoming more and more important in the contemporary classical music scene, especially because many concerts now have pre-concert talks given by the performer. Practicing this in front of a smaller crowd at the BLUU is a terrific opportunity to learn how to speak in public before speaking in larger venues where there can be more at stake. Furthermore, besides being good practice for the performer, sharing information about the composition provides an important context for the listener. It helps give the audience some background information to what we are playing, and it makes the music more intelligible and intriguing.

### *The Future*

As far as the immediate future of the BLUU concerts are concerned, I would like to expand the concert series by collaborating with several other groups within the TCU School of

Music. This first group would be the TCU Society of Composers. There are many composers at TCU who would greatly appreciate the opportunity to perform their music in front of new audiences. Not only would it be a wonderful way to demonstrate that classical music is alive and well, it would also alert people to the fact that there are composers still walking among us – composers aren't just dead people in powdered wigs. In addition, besides collaborating with the TCU Society of Composers, I also want to expand the BLUU concerts to include other departments from the TCU School of Music besides just the piano. Having concerts that feature other instruments and other types of ensembles is a great way of introducing audiences to the standard canon of chamber music.

In the end, I am happy to say that I will be staying at TCU for my master's degree and that these expansions will be able to happen in the future. This is not something that I was able to say when I was first writing this thesis. For a time, I wasn't sure who to pass on these concerts to if I attended school elsewhere. Thankfully though, this is not something I need to worry about now. I will be able to continue these concerts and expand them in a variety of new and exciting ways. It is my goal to keep furthering the progress that these concerts have had so far, and I hope to keep sharing more classical music with the larger TCU community.